

*Announce legislation to extend benefits for officers and firefighters injured or killed in the line of duty, as well as their families.*

May 14, 2009

WASHINGTON - United States Senator Mary Landrieu, D-La., and Representative Charlie Melancon, LA-03, today honored the police officers who lost their lives in the line of duty last year and are being honored at this year's National Police Week. Five Louisiana officers are among the 133 officers who will be recognized this year and whose names are being formally dedicated on the walls of the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Washington, D.C.

**"Our officers are here for National Police Week, which gives us an opportunity to reflect on the sacrifices and bravery of thousands of men and women in uniform in small towns, rural areas and urban areas throughout America," Sen. Landrieu said. It gives us time to reflect on how much we appreciate the bravery and professionalism of these officers. And, it gives us an opportunity to stand in solidarity with the families that have lost so much and sacrificed so much."**

Sen. Landrieu and Rep. Melancon also discussed the First Responders Support Act, S. 1037, which they introduced today to strengthen and broaden the benefits provided to police officers and firefighters injured or killed in the line of duty, as well as their families.

**"When law enforcement officers become disabled or killed in the line of duty, not only do the families go through a very horrific time, but then the suffering continues because the families have lost one of their primary providers," Rep. Melancon said. "What we are trying to do with the First Responders Support Act is make sure that the family stays whole, make sure that the children are not deprived of their education, make sure that if an officer can go back to work, that he or she doesn't have to sacrifice all of his or her disability benefits, money needed to pay for medical bills or continuing care not covered by insurance."**

The five Louisiana officers who lost their lives in the line of duty last year were: Officer Nicola Diane Cotton (New Orleans Police Department); Corporal Mark A. Beck (Baton Rouge Police Department); Captain Keith Paul Chiasson (Thibodaux Police Department); Deputy Sheriff Matha Ann Woods-Shareef (Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office); Deputy Sheriff Jeremy Keith Carter (Evangeline Parish Sheriff's Office). The families and colleagues of these fallen officers - as well as other Louisiana law enforcement officials - joined Sen. Landrieu and Rep. Melancon today.

"National Police Week is when we come to pay our respects to fallen officers who have been killed in the line of duty, and we come to participate in the events and ceremonies during the week," said **Major Todd Diaz of the Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office**. "We have had four fallen officers over the history of Lafourche Parish."

"This week means a lot to officers," said **Officer Matthew Patin of the New Orleans Police Department**, "It lets the surviving families know that the sacrifice they've made has not been forgotten."

Officer Patin was in Washington, D.C., to honor the memory of two friends who were killed in the line of duty in 2008, Officer Nicola Cotton of the New Orleans Police Department and Corporal Mark Beck of the Baton Rouge Police Department.

In addition to honoring fallen officers from around the nation, Thibodaux Police Chief Craig Melancon is supporting the family of his colleague Captain Keith Chiasson. Captain Chiasson was shot in the line of duty in 1980 and continued working at the police department, despite being paralyzed. He died last year from complications associated with his injuries.

"I watched Keith suffer from 1980, from the time of his shooting, until his death in March of last year, with very little support from any type of federal or state assistance," **Chief Melancon said.** "

I watched him for the most part - except for some assistance he got along the way - have to pay for his own van and his own wheelchair. These were tremendous expenses."

"Keith's message needs to be put out across the country. When an officers is killed in the line of duty, while the benefits do come rather quickly, it's rather cut and dry. But when an officer is injured and lives for years with these horrible injuries, the benefits do not roll in so easily. The families are left to deal with all of these incredible costs, plus the hardship and the medical issues."

"You know, our situation is unique because we have had both sides," **said Amy Chiasson, daughter of Captain Chiasson.**

"We have had the disability issue and we have had the line-of-duty death. So we kind of know what it is like on both sides of the fence."

"At the time my dad was injured, it was either you take the disability and stay home, and he definitely didn't want to stay home. He loved being a police officer, he loved being in the office, being around the guys and just being involved and chasing the bad guys."

"This is an extremely important week to support our fallen heroes, and also our disabled heroes," said **Captain Will Hart of the St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office.** "I applaud this bill, and I certainly hope that it goes through. Every two and a half days, an officer loses his life in the line of duty. I think there is a calling to serve the fallen heroes, and the families of our disabled heroes. We need to bond as one and stick together as public servants."

**"This bill will increase the federal benefit for fallen officers, and will extend the benefit to our first responders who become disabled in the line of duty, yet still want to work," Sen. Landrieu said. "We owe it to our first responders to be more flexible, more in tune with their individual and family needs. Their sacrifices should not fall solely on the children and spouses that have already shouldered so much."**

**"This bill is about being fair and taking care of these officers," Rep. Melancon said. "Law enforcement officers work for our good. They work in the public interest. They put their life on the line every time they go out, and we have an obligation to them and to their families." Sen. Landrieu and I hope that this bill will honor the sacrifice of first responders and their families and help their lives return to some degree of normalcy."**

### **Louisiana's TOP COP**

Sen. Landrieu and Rep. Melancon were also joined by Louisiana's TOP COP, Deputy Rhonda Goff of the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office. This is the 16th year that the National

Association of Police Organizations has given the TOP COPS award, which pays tribute to outstanding law enforcement officers across the country for actions above and beyond the call of duty. President Barack Obama honored the award winners at a White House ceremony this week.

"Everyone that puts on this uniform accepts the fact that they might get killed in the line of duty," said Deputy Goff. "What most people do not want to think about, and what I cannot accept, is being injured for a long time, and having a family that experiences terrible hardships financially. We work overtime to try and give our families everything we can, and if we are injured, it seems to disappear in a matter of months. That is not something I want to accept. I totally encourage everyone getting behind Sen. Landrieu and supporting this bill. It is definitely needed."

### **The First Responders Support Act**

#### **Strengthening and Expanding Disability Benefits**

The Landrieu-Melancon First Responder's Support Act increases benefits to disabled officers and firefighters and the families of those killed in the line of duty. Under current law, the Department of Justice's Public Safety Officer's Benefits Program provides disability benefits for public safety officers who have been permanently and totally disabled by a catastrophic injury sustained in the line of duty. To be eligible for the benefit, the injury must permanently prevent the officer from performing any gainful work. The program currently provides a one-time payment of \$315,746 to these disabled officers adjusted for inflation annually, as well as to spouses and children of deceased public safety officers. The bill increases the one-time payment to \$350,000 and creates a proportionately lower level of disability benefits for public safety officers that have sustained a serious injury but are still able to work. For example, if an individual is 75 percent disabled, the individual would be entitled to roughly \$262,500

#### **Broadening Educational Benefits**

The legislation also increases the lifetime educational benefit allowed under the Public Safety Officers' Educational Assistance (PSOEA) Program. Under the current law, this

program helps the spouses or children of disabled or deceased first responders with tuition and fees, room and board, books, supplies and other education-related costs. As of October 1, 2008, the maximum award for a full-time student is \$915 per month. An individual can take advantage of the benefit for a lifetime maximum of 45 months, totaling \$41,175. The legislation increases the benefit to \$1,500 per month, totaling \$67,500 over 45 months, and would adjust it for inflation on a yearly basis. This more accurately reflects the average price of attending a U.S. college. The legislation also permits educational benefits for children from previous marriages.

### **Expanding Counseling/Mental Health Services**

The legislation creates an office within the Department of Justice to distribute grants to local organizations that provide free or reduced cost mental health services and counseling to family members of fallen officers and firefighters, or seriously injured first responders who are struggling to recover. The office will serve as a clearinghouse for state and local first responders and their families so they can find such services for free or at discounted rates.

### **Supplementing Continuing Care**

The bill creates a refundable tax credit for injured first responders and their caregivers to use for nursing, health care and home health services that are not covered by state or local workers' compensation, insurance or any other type of health care benefit. Injured first responders or their familial caregivers (a spouse, a child or a parent) could take up to a \$7,500 tax credit.

### ***Photographs are available for publication:***

- Sen. Landrieu speaks at a Thursday press conference. She is joined by the families and colleagues of Louisiana officers who were killed in the line of duty in 2008 [http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14\\_Press\\_Conference.jpg](http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14_Press_Conference.jpg)
- Major Reggie Brown of the Baton Rouge City Constable's Office speaks at a Thursday press conference on Capitol Hill [http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14\\_Press\\_Conference\\_2.jpg](http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14_Press_Conference_2.jpg)
- Jefferson Parish Deputy Rhonda Goff, Louisiana's TOP COP, speaks at a Thursday

press conference on Capitol Hill [http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14\\_Press\\_Conference\\_3.jpg](http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14_Press_Conference_3.jpg)

- Sen. Landrieu greets family members of Captain Keith Chiasson of the Thibodaux Police Department, who died in 2008 as a result of injuries he sustained in the line of duty in 1980. [http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14\\_Chiasson.jpg](http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14_Chiasson.jpg)
- Sen. Landrieu and the Chiasson family: [http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14\\_Chiasson\\_Group.JPG](http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14_Chiasson_Group.JPG)
- Rep. Charlie Melancon and Lafourche Parish Deputies [http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14\\_Lafourche.JPG](http://landrieu.senate.gov/media/09.05.14_Lafourche.JPG)

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- 30 -